**1948: The Birth of Israel**

In May 1948, the Jews of Palestine declared an independent state in their ancient homeland. Arab armies immediately attacked, and the conflict drags on six decades later.

By *Sam Roberts*

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In a simple, solemn, emotional ceremony at a Tel Aviv art museum that began with the singing of "Hatikvah," the national anthem, the state of Israel was proclaimed by the new Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, at 4 p.m. on May 14, 1948.

The proclamation 60 years ago this spring promised social and political equality for all inhabitants of the new nation, and Jewish leaders vowed to safeguard the sanctity of Muslim and Christian holy places. But there was little time for celebration in a city already blacked out to protect it from the Arab invasion everyone expected. The attack by six Arab nations came immediately, touching off a spiral of war and violence that continues to this day, despite numerous attempts by the United States and other nations to mediate one of the world's most intractable conflicts.

Israel's roots as a Jewish homeland can be traced back thousands of years, to a time when many competing tribes struggled over the territory now known as the Middle East. The Old Testament recounts Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, and Joshua conquering Canaanite city-states in an area that roughly corresponds to today's Israel. David established a kingdom based around Jerusalem about 1000 B.C.

But this area on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, at the center of ancient trade routes, would later be fought over by the Assyrians, the Persians, and the armies of Alexander the Great. In 164 B.C., the Jews came under Rome's control. In 135 A.D., the Romans drove the Jews from Jerusalem. The Romans were succeeded by the Byzantines, the Turks, the Crusaders, the Arabs, and finally the Ottomans in the 16th century.

Though there was a Jewish presence under all these rulers, it wasn't until the late 19th century that European Jews began emigrating in large numbers to what was then known as Palestine. They left Europe to escape anti-Semitism, especially in Russia, and to be part of the movement known as Zionism, one of the many strains of nationalism then sweeping the world. The Zionists' goal was to re-establish a Jewish state in the ancient land of Israel, referred to many times in the Bible as Zion.

**Conflicting Promises**

Zionism began to bear fruit during World War I. The Ottoman Empire—based in Turkey and spanning Southeastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa—had sided with Germany and against Britain, France, and later the U.S., in the war. In 1917, Britain promised support for a Jewish national home in Palestine in what is known as the Balfour Declaration. But at the same time, the British were also promising independence to Arabs in the Middle East in return for their support against the Turks and Germany.

After the Allied victory in the war, the League of Nations made Palestine a British protectorate (or mandate), and carved out the countries of Iraq, Syria, and eventually Lebanon. A few years later, Britain created Transjordan (now Jordan) from the part of Palestine located east of the Jordan river. The mostly arbitrary boundaries of these Arab states helped set the stage for many conflicts that are still unresolved today.

At the same time, Palestinians—Arabic speakers, both Muslim and Christian, who had lived in Palestine under Ottoman and British rule—began expressing their own nationalist aspirations, putting Britain in the middle of a very difficult situation.

The British mandate continued until three years after the end of World War II in 1945. By then, Nazi Germany's campaign to exterminate Europe's Jews helped gain world support for a Jewish homeland. But to enlist Arab support against Germany during the war, the British barred additional Jewish immigration to Palestine. They continued to do so after the war despite pressure from the U.S. and other countries, keeping the population at 1.2 million Arabs and 600,000 Jews, with land ownership roughly evenly split. Zionist paramilitary groups resorted to bombings and attacks against British troops and officials.

In 1947, a special United Nations commission recommended that Palestine be split into separate Arab and Jewish states, with Jerusalem under international control. On November 29, the U.N. General Assembly accepted the partition plan, with the support of the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

But while the Jews of Palestine accepted partition, the Arabs rejected it, and both sides prepared for Britain's withdrawal the next year. Arabs rioted and attacked Jewish settlements, and the Jews retaliated. Thousands of Palestinians fled the violence; some were forcibly expelled. The Haganah, a Jewish paramilitary force, transformed itself into a regular army that began to score military victories that were small but significant enough to impress President Harry S. Truman.

With the last British troops set to withdraw when the mandate expired at midnight on May 14, 1948, the Jews staked their claim and declared independence, calling the new state Israel.

All along, it had been unclear whether Washington would support a Jewish state. Truman had initially opposed independence for Israel, fearing it would want U.S. military support. But in an example of how personal politics can get, Truman was persuaded to support the new state by Eddie Jacobson, his World War I army buddy and partner in a Kansas City men's store where Truman sold suits before getting into politics. Jacobson, who was Jewish, avoided publicity by sneaking into the White House, and received Truman's pledge of support.

After saying that he would "do what I think is right and let them all go to hell," Truman formally recognized the Jewish state, two hours after Ben-Gurion's proclamation in Tel Aviv.

"In one of the most hopeful periods of their troubled history," a *Times* correspondent wrote from Tel Aviv that day, "the Jewish people here gave a sigh of relief and took a new hold on life when they learned that the greatest national power had accepted them into the international fraternity."

But Israel's survival was far from a sure thing. The armies of six Arab nations—Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria—with a combined population of more than 30 million attacked the new state. Although there were occasional cease-fires, full-scale fighting didn't end until an armistice in 1949, with borders established along a "green line" drawn on a map; the war ended with no recognition of Israel by the Arab states, no state for Palestinians, and with control over Jerusalem divided between Israel and Jordan.

The war created a refugee problem that remains unresolved today: the fate of 700,000 Palestinians and their descendants who fled or were driven from Israel to become refugees in neighboring Arab states.

The ensuing six decades have brought several wars but also recognition of Israel and peace treaties with both Egypt and Jordan *(*[*see timeline*](http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/upfront/features/f041408_TP_Israel_TIMELINE.htm)*)*. But there has been no resolution to the questions of statehood for the Palestinians and security for Israel. Israelis live in fear of terrorist attacks, like the one in March in which a Palestinian gunman killed eight students studying in a Jerusalem high school library. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza struggle with the hardships of living under Israel's 41-year military occupation; and there is high unemployment and restrictions on Palestinians' movement, including the controversial security barrier Israel began erecting in 2003.

**An Elusive Search**

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas say they are committed to coexistence between Israel and an independent Palestinian state. But peace talks have been threatened by rocket attacks on Israeli cities by Hamas, the militant Islamic group that seized power last year in Gaza, and Israeli retaliation.

"Without measurable improvements in the lives of both Israelis and Palestinians," *The Times* wrote recently, "a few spectacular acts of terrorism can derail even the best-intentioned peace talks."

Aaron David Miller, author of *The Much Too Promised Land: America's Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace*, warns that the search is even more elusive because Palestinians remain divided. "You cannot make peace with half of the Palestinian polity," he says, "and go to war with the other half."